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ABSTRACT

In its broadest context, play can be interpreted as any pleasurable use of discretionary time. Playfulness is an intrinsic feature of being human, and should be viewed in the light of a total lifestyle, not as an occurrence in an isolated time of life. Adult play appears to be an indefinable and controversial concept. A holistic approach should be taken to understand the phenomenon of adult play, given its wide breadth of definition and interpretation. As the human being matures, play behavior and reasons for participating in play activities change and evolve. Adults are able to create their approaches to play, either by contrasting work and other life attitudes with play behavior, or by choosing play activities that reinforce their life styles. Many goals, methods, and styles of work are increasingly spilling over into leisure activity. An important challenge is to restore the quality of playfulness to adult play. Those concerned with teaching or providing play awareness must pay attention to Aristotle's ancient ideal of an integrated--body/mind/spirit--person. Social systems, educators, administrators, families, and individuals of all capabilities must join in a concerted attempt to develop natural play in a holistic fashion. (CJ)

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ADULT PLAY

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ADULT PLAY

Play Is a Puzzle

Adult play is the Rubik's Cube of leisure theory in that it is popular and current, yet you can seldom find anyone who has solved it! Some would discard it after briefly and aimlessly twiddling the different colored blocks. Others would suggest that it could best be solved through the structured logical process of observation and analysis that I intend to use in the following discussion. Of course, it is questionable whether Rubik's Cube merits any serious attention in the first place, perhaps it is but a frustrating fad. The phenomenon of adult play is relegated to similar realms of triviality by some sectors of society. Play is considered to be a marginally significant sphere of human endeavor by individuals reared on the mind/body dichotomy of scholasticism. They argue that a phenomenon so extremely removed from the serious business of work does not merit rigorous study or academic respectability. Similarly vestiges of ascetism and puritanism permeate societal perspectives of any pursuit of pleasure. These ideologies link play with hedonism, narcissism and the mischief of idle hands. Views on the importance of play as a focus of enquiry range from these extremes of academic indifference and societal censorship to the belief that play is the only true form of seriousness. Huizinga (Huizinga, 1949) concludes that play is basic to human civilization; that culture arises as play. Miller (Miller, 1968) goes so far as to predict that we are entering a new age of play. As evidence that play is fast becoming the predominant myth of the

culture, he refers to such book titles as Games People Play and The Money Game, the increasing media coverage of games and game shows and the pervasive influence in society of the proverb that life is just a game. Indeed, if we define play in the broadest context of playfulness to include any pleasurable use of discretionary time, we find play permeating every aspect of our culture. Playfulness is an intrinsic feature of being human. Play should be viewed in the light of a total lifestyle, not as it occurs in an isolated moment of time. Playfulness is a product of an individual's unique philosophy of life which can not be restricted in its outpouring.

Given this perspective, how can we best approach and analyse such an apparently indefinable and controversial concept as adult play?

By dispelling some popular myths surrounding play, we may logically clarify its essence.

Through observation and deduction we may synthesize views of how becoming adult affects play behavior.

By projecting these conclusions into a scenario of the future, we may predict the impact of adult play upon tomorrow's world.

Play In Words

A basic principle of research is that to study a topic, one must first be able to define its parameters. Understanding adult play may be limited by culturally popular interpretations of the vocabulary. "Adult" and "play" are common words with complex

meanings. The words spoken are rarely the words understood. Personal experiences and education often affect the listener's interpretation of the speaker's message. Perceptions of what being "adult" means may hinge upon the chronological age of the listener, cultural stereotypes of what being old implies or personal recollections of parents or significant authority figures. A "typical" adult may spring to mind but a statistical norm of average age, income and children to the closest fraction is not a useful construct for definitional purposes. The adult who plays is too complex an organism to be crammed into a convenient statistical package. In actuality, an analysis of how and why adults play must deal with male and female. It must encompass wealth and health. It must include an age range from puberty to senility. It must allow for the idiosyncracies of each individual, including fitness and activity levels, interests and capabilities, cultural and social expectations and restraints. The phrase "adult play" seems seductively simple but to ignore the complexities of interpretation would be misleading and naive.

Similarly, play can be classified as time, place, activity or mental set. The English school recess was a time away from the classroom called play-time when students would indulge in play activities in the playground, in a playful manner. After fifteen minutes of exuberant outburst, they would file dutifully and punctually back to their desks to resume the serious business of school work. To accept such simple dichotomies would be to ignore the complexities and realities of human existence. Work and play cnnot be so simply partitioned from each other because

the attitude of playfulness, the basic ingredient of play, will intrude into both domains. Any teacher would admit that covert games and playfulness continue in the work environment and any coach could point to an athlete who is "working on" his skills. Increasing experimentation and complexity of lifestyle are features of the maturation process which make such simplistic explanations even less convincing for the adult at play than the child. In his excellent analysis of the definitions of play, Ellis (Ellis, 1973) notes the dangers of over-simplifying play as non-work, voluntary behavior or intrinsically motivated activity and the shortcomings of attempting to define play by motive or by content. He concludes that play is a plastic construct which has yet to be satisfactorily defined in a way that satisfies all.

Given such a breadth of definition and interpretation of the nature of adult play, we must conclude that to really understand the phenomenon we should take a holistic approach. While it is clear that adult play must contain an element of playfulness, it is not so clear that many of the popular conceptions of play are useful or enlightening. In fact, some of these myths serve to restrict our perception by limiting our horizons. We can conclude that play is not solely, or even mostly, the province of children, nor is it a product of time, place or activity. It is not an isolated moment in a day of work; it relates to a total lifestyle. We must be wary of glib definitions and explanations of a phenomenon so open to misunderstanding. As we grow older, the diversity of meanings of an apparently straightforward invitation to play multiply. At the physical level we may be

concerned with the mechanics of movement and the selection, intensity and duration of the activity. At subliminal levels we engage in a multiplicity of head games, all under the innocuous umbrella of play.

The Adult at Play

Growing older in our culture certainly affects the way we perceive play and our play patterns. Nietzsche suggested that really to play, one must play like a child. Many reasons for playing, many attitudes toward play and many behaviors exhibited during play can be classified as childlike. It is equally accurate to suggest, however, that in each of these categories we may find uniquely "adult" tendencies, differences which deserve rigorous attention if we are to make inroads into a greater understanding of the phenomenon of adult play. Such scrutiny is rare, however, for the very tendencies which serve to distinguish the adult from the child are those which hamper the possibility of meaningful study. Most research into play has been conducted on children because their behaviors are readily observable, their actions are ingenuous and they provide a stable sample. As these children grow up they tend to become increasingly insular, study of their lifestyles and specifically their play styles becomes an invasion of privacy. As they develop their adult identities, true feelings, true reasons for participation and real expressions of spontaneity become hidden by a veneer of sophistication. Consequently, a game which might have been a simple expression of exuberance and energy in childhood might

adopt various subliminal undertones when played by the adult. It might become a game of power and dominance, a sexual encounter or a vehicle for psychological warfare or introspective reflection. The complexities of adulthood don't only refer to the nuances of adult playfulness but also to the system and structures which increasingly impinge on our consciousness as we age. The constraints of family, work, education, group networks and some religious observances all tend to mitigate against the imaginative spontaneity we associate with childhood. The scepticism engendered by surviving in an adult world decreases our ability to recapture that playful state of mind characterized by a willingness to suspend disbelief and become absorbed by a make-believe universe. Where children can dream and create personal play worlds, adults generally need structure. The child may play, the adult must play at something, usually a game. The popularization of a play activity frequently entails a proliferation of rules, regulations and restrictions. As the game evolves, structure increases, playfulness invariably decreases and a sport takes shape.

As the human being matures, so play behavior and reasons for participating change and evolve. Given our holistic perspective on play, we cannot accept simple explanations for playfulness such as the release of surplus energy or information processing but we may gain a generalized understanding of play behavior by drawing from a variety of modern theories. The generalization theory proposed by Breer and Locke (Breer and Locke, 1965) in 1965 suggests that adults select play activities which give them

the opportunity to enjoy the same behaviors and experiences which have been rewarding at work. In counterpoint, but not contradiction, to the theory of generalization is the theory of compensation developed by Hagedom and Labowitz (Hagedom and Labowitz, 1968). They suggested that adults participate in play activities to satisfy psychic needs not met by their working behaviors. While these theories provide some insight into why adults play, they are both based upon cultural notions of work and play. For a child, the worlds of work and play tend to be distinct and separate, their definition usually depends upon the perspective of significant authority figures. Adults, however, have the capacity to create some of their own reality. They may choose to approach their work as play, selecting jobs on the basis of intrinsic rewards in which work becomes a process of maximizing its playlike qualities. On the other hand, play might become a forum for recycling the same dominant attitudes prevalent in the work place. Because one of the characteristics of growing older is a tendency to habituate, to develop set views and to become increasingly inflexible we can expect the attitudes linking each sphere of life to become increasingly predictable and consistent. We might expect an individual who exhibits Type A or Type B tendencies at work to display similar traits in play. Type A Play would be distinguished by an intense sense of time urgency, a tendency to race against the clock, the need to increase the intensity of play and guilt feelings accompanying relaxation. Other characteristics of this personality type might be an inability to play for fun or appreciate the present and the

self during play. Play behavior would be dominated by intense achievement motivation, aggression verging on hostility and a high sense of competitiveness. Conversely, those who exhibit an absence of Type A play behavior traits and habits, who play for fun and appreciate the quality of their play, can be expected to display similar Type B characteristics at work. Because work and play cannot be partitioned from each other artificially we may find these specific patterns of behavior and attitudes permeating our work life, family life and play.

To understand the apparent increase in Type A Play, we must step away from the individual to scrutinize the systems and institutions surrounding and influencing the development of the adult. Many of the goals, methods and styles of our work institutions are increasingly spilling over into our leisure institutions. These leisure institutions are the resource to which our adult tends to turn for play. In much of our "leisure" activity, no less than in our "work" activity, we place a high value on advanced planning and goal setting, competition and winning, incremental improvement through the mastery of special knowledge and technique and the efficient utilization of time. White (White, 1959) and Morris (Morris, 1969) recognized these tendencies in the formulation of the theories of competence and effectance. Play behavior is explained as a demonstration of competence and mastery where the adult temporarily controls the environment. The explanatory power of this theory is evident in an age of complexity and change in which daily decisions are becoming more time-consuming, complicated and threatening. In a world

where the average citizen is being forced to absorb more and more information, often of a complex technical nature, at an increasingly accelerated rate, play may be a comforting medium of mastery. There is little doubt that one of the attractions of jogging is that it gives runners of all ages and all physical conditions an opportunity to be successful however slowly or awkwardly they move. The ripple effect of increasing self--knowledge and self-respect arising from the jogging experience has been well documented in our popular culture. The sense of mastery is never experienced more acutely than during the peak experiences of play. During these moments we may affirm our identity and confirm our existence through seeking and finding our optimal arousal level. Ellis (Ellis, 1973) suggests that this is the key to understanding play, which he describes as that behavior that is motivated by the need to elevate the level of arousal toward the optimal. This understanding of the nature of adult play poses serious questions and challenges for those in the leisure and education systems who are in a position to lend a guiding hand to a society poised to enter the age of play.

The Future of Adult Play

In his book, Play Behavior, Levy (Levy, 1978) suggests that society's error this century has been its inability to recognize the importance of play as a form of human expression throughout the human life cycle. He supports Plato's contention that play is the answer to the puzzle of our existence because it provides the opportunity for happiness and cosmological unity. Actualiz-

ing this opportunity is the challenge of the future for parents and planners, teachers and preachers, psychologists and social workers, researchers and recreationists and all in a position to shape the evolution of tomorrow's play world.

A first important step is to restore the quality of playfulness to adult play. Playfulness is in the mind, not the activity. This state of mind can be maximized by play experiences which are essentially autonomous and intrinsic or can be stifled by excessive structure and goal orientation. The process can be productive for all adults at play who indulge in the playful mental pastime of "imagineering". This involves creatively generating, or engineering, imaginative ideas. As opposed to a thoughtless, irresponsible characterization of the play process, imagineering may link our playful energy with cerebral speculation. We may develop sensitivity to our inner qualities and capacities and to the role that nature may play in helping us achieve a state of inner biological rhythm. Without this union of mind and body in our playfulness, play may become a state of dependency upon external gratification and organization. The prevalence of consumption of resources, dependency upon technical gadgetry and an epidemic of spectatoritis indicate that imagineering is not yet predominant in our culture. However, there are indications that traditional notions of play are starting to be questioned. Increasingly, we find adults returning to independent simple expressions of playfulness. The increasing popularity of backpacking,, cross country skiing and windsurfing exemplify the resourcefulness of individuals wishing to play

harmoniously with Nature. Cooperative and creative play, Movement Education, the New Games movement, and new, innovative and exciting ways to play are evidence of the new spirit of playfulness permeating the culture. Secondly, playfulness should not be excluded from the work place. Too frequently the playfulness of the worker is stifled by routine, and creative energies are never tapped. As the age of play dawns, the play ethic should join the work ethic and the profit motive to symbolize a new form of capitalism. The infusion of the play ethic would involve vocational guidance designed to avoid waste of human potential. Individuals would be encouraged to select the occupation they consider most like play, where they can happily develop their interests. The profit margin should be measured in human terms rather than dollars and cents. Responsibility, a measure of freedom, trust and loyalty, concern for the total well being of the worker and job descriptions which focus on intrinsic pleasure of the task, are symbolic of the gradual evolution of the play ethic in the work place. Thirdly, our systems of leisure and learning must address the question of how well they are preparing the individual for a world of choices and how successfully they are arranging this world to create the greatest scope for play at an optimal level. Research (Charles, 1979) has focussed upon the ideology which is transmitted by the organization of our curricula and the pedagogical perspectives of our education system. It has been suggested that we are allowing the ethics of a technological society to infiltrate our classrooms, that we are in fact teaching the values of the work place in the guise of play, that we

are emphasizing the structure of learning, demanding conformity and rewarding efficiency. By focussing on the body as an instrument or machine, are we really helping the individual to play better as he grows up, or to forget how to play? To enhance playfulness, educators should encourage participatioon for intrinsic pleasure, encourage spontaneity and originality in activity selection and allow students to impose their own structure, evaluate their own performance and express their individuality. Similarly, opportunities should be afforded for all individuals to indulge in their own peculiar preferences at their own optimal arousal levels (Charles, 1982).

Finally, those concerned with teaching or providing play awareness must pay more than lip service to Aristotle's ancient ideal of an integrated--body/mind/spirit--person. If anything, our systems currently work to the detriment of a unified aproach to self-fulfillment. Play is divided and subdivided into numerous discrete classifications for administrative and academic reasons. We find athletics and art, P.E. and psychology, music and theatre, recreation and religion approaching the same phenomenon from different angles. Each discipline jealously maintains artificial distinctions between physical, cerebral, spiritual and affective domains. I agree with Siedentop (Siedentop, 1972) that the source of meaning in physical education is best explained by the concept of play and that play is the classification necessary in order to most satisfactorily define the concept of physical education. He concludes that physical educators have a grave task ahead of them. This grave task includes recognizing that

play is unity of mind, body and spirit and leading a reformation of an educational system which fragments play awareness. It includes revamping vocational guidance to bring playfulness to the work place. It includes promoting the play ethic as a sound educational philosophy and a healthy basis for life. It includes espousing the value of imagineering and creative energy in all phases of life. It incudes embracing social systems, educators, administrators, families and individuals of all capabilities and disabilities in a concerted attempt to develop natural play in a holistic fashion.

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